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DANTE AND THE PEACE OF THE WORLD

By

DR. ALBERTO C. BONASCHI

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An Address delivered at the meeting of the
"Friends of Italy"
Town Hall Club, New York
January 31, 1945

by Dr. Alberto C. Bonaschi, Member
Board of Higher Education, New York.

Friends and Guests,

I esteem it a great privilege to have been asked to address a meeting of the "Friends of Italy" tonight, a privilege which I consider bestowed upon me only through the kindness of the Society's managers. For that sentiment on their part I offer them my best thanks. While I do not know whether I shall prove worthy of such honor, yet, if I should fail in this respect it will not be at least through lack of determination on my part to succeed in my task.

I have selected Dante as the basic intellectual element of my address because I believe that never as in the present tragic times we could find a greater and more inspiring figure around which to rally ourselves. Dante, in fact, not only has been the symbol of the aspirations of Italy through more than six centuries, but also symbolizes that spirit of unity that must bind together all sons and friends of Italy and fortify them in an unselfish determination to help rescuing Italy from the undescribably misery in which that unfortunate land is now steeped to the lips through the horrors of war, devastation of land and cities, distressive penury and such trepidation for her future that is nearly despair.

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* * *

Dante, above all, is great as a poet because in his work poetry is what the highest minds have conceived it to be; that is, the faculty of symbolization consecrated to the service of a great idea. And as an Italian, Dante is the greatest of all poets, because from the peak of his intellect, casting his eyes upon the expanse of time, he conceived, more than six centuries ago, the Italian unification and gave to that individual conception the most powerful element of penetration into the minds of his countrymen by shaping the definite form of their tongue, which became, in turn, the basic element of their national life, the cement of their unity. From that time we may measure Italy's civil and political power by the eagerness or the apathy with which Dante's poem was sought, read, commented and published in Italy. Even Machiavelli's idea that the unification of Italy was to be the labour of a Prince might be traced to Dante, both in the Divine Comedy and in "De Monarchia". But the petty tyrants who saw in Dante's conception the end of their power, disavowed Dante's Great Work and often forbade its reading within their own domains. That rebirth of arts and science in Italy, which followed the gigantic endeavors of the Humanists, that splendid period of intellectual life which is known to us as the Rinascimento, was accompanied and integrated by a veritable cult of Dante, in which the new craft of printing participated with a profusion of scholarly editions and revealed itself in all its intellectual impulse, artistic possibilities and genuine grandeur. The age of Italy's most abject civil and political serfdom, the decadence of every form of art, the abandonment of the pursuits of science during the second half of the seventeenth century and most of the eighteenth, when so much of Italy was ur[illegible]

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poets' because from the peak of his intellect' creating his eye
on the universal' and the particular' he was able to give
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which Dante's poem was sought' been commented and hospitaled in
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to be the work of a Prince' might be traced to Dante' both in
accomplishment and intellectual background. In which
the Italian intellectual life' which is known to us as the Renaissance'
and typically expressed in the humanists' that abhorred Petrarch of
Dante's great work and often forgave his Leading activity as
poet' and Petrarch of this and science in Italy' which followed
Dante'. That Petrarch of this and science in Italy' which followed
to the study of the humanists' and Petrarch' and Dante's work
to be the intellectual' and Petrarch' and Dante's work
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potentates or dominated by petty princes whose tyranny was different from that of their predecessors of the Middle Ages in that only that it was more refined, cunning and enervating; when part of Italy constituted the dominion of a senile government such as the Venetian Republic; that age also marks the lowest ebb in the study and love of Dante, of whose works there was then a very scarce number of editions printed, some of them, it is true, worthy of the Great Poet, but several others the worst that were ever published. And at the dawn of the nineteenth century, when, with the fall of the Napoleonic Empire, the various nationalities of Europe awoke to the call of the new ideas and Italy started on the path which led her to unity and freedom, Dante again became the symbol of Italy's aspirations. The greatest of Italy's poets of that time, Alfieri, Foscolo, Leopardi; the man whose genius inherited Dante's love of Italy's freedom and unity, he who kindled and kept burning in the youth of the country the brightest flame of patriotism, Giuseppe Mazzini; all the best and highest intellects of Italy turned to Dante as to their Supreme Genius in the impending struggle for that liberty and unity for which they were preparing themselves.

Thus Dante's inspiration gave renewed strength to the Italian people and, as a beacon of unextinguishable light, guided them, during the last century, through fifty years of numberless sacrifices, untold martyrdoms and heroic struggles in eight wars and on one hundred battlefields, until Rome, the Eternal City from which the light of civilization radiated all over the earth and which Dante had conceived as the spiritual capital of all the world, became, in the new order of things, the center of the rejuvenated and united Italian Nation.

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And Dante lives with the world of today and is part and parcel of the world's intellectual life, with more glory and ascendency than during his life, because, as Carducci said, he above all is a very great poet; a very great poet because he was a great man; a great man because he had a great conscience. No other poet in the world had the heroic conscience of Dante. And, may I humbly add, he was also a great judge of men and things, not from the low and narrow point of view of his time and the country of his birth, but from the highest and amplest field that human mind could ever reach and dominate, so that he felt compelled to transcend the limits of the earth and extend his all-embracing conception to the world of spirits, pausing only before the supreme glory and the unattainable vision of God. Dante lives with the world of today because of what even a Puritan and truly and thoroughly Nordic character as was Thomas Carlyle found in him (Heroes and Hero Worship):

"Dante," says Carlyle, "speaks to the noble, the pure and the great, in all times and places. Neither does he grow obsolete. Dante burns as a pure star, fixed there, in the firmament, at which the great and the high of all ages kindle themselves; he is the possession of all chosen of the world for uncounted time..... True souls, in all generations of the world who look on Dante will find a brotherhood in him; the deep sincerity of his thoughts, his afflictions and hopes will speak likewise to their sincerity; they will feel that in this too Dante is a brother." So wrote Carlyle; and never has humanity more than in these times needed the thought of Dante as a guide in the attainments of its ideals.

Twenty-six years ago we came out of one of the gre[illegible] tragedies that humanity had ever passed through [illegible]

and

looking back to it with the same perturbation which Dante felt in his heart:

".....Like to one who panting wearily,
Having come out from the sea on to the shore,
Turns to the perilous water and gazes...."

and so did our mind, like Dante's,

".....which was still fleeing,
Turn back to survey the place
From which no human being ever emerged"

and we hoped and prayed and worked to eliminate from the world those passions, that hatred, that thirst of power and domination and riches, which the terrific lesson taught to us by that calamity had shown to be at bottom of the afflictions of mankind. But our hopes, our prayers, our work, all has been in vain, because, like the Bourbons and the privileged classes of France when restored to the throne and to their prerogatives after twenty-two years of exile during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era, from the World War the nations had learned nothing and forgotten nothing. Thus we are now pouring out again the best blood of nations in a new war of such wide range of action, magnitude of strain and fury of devastation as to defy comparison with any of the most extensive, cruel and devastating conflicts in history; and this again for the purpose which we failed to reach in the previous Great War, that of making the world safe for humanity. However, while we may, at times, fear that we may fear that all these sacrifices will sap the strength of mankind, yet we are this time fundamentally penetrated by the conviction that justice shall triumph in the end, triumph above men, above interests, above ambitions. Thus no

stronger impulse to this aspiration can be found than in Dante, who, rising above the quarrels of the Communes, the factional struggles for political power, the interests of the Empire, the ambitions of potentates, fearlessly brought the highest lords of the earth before the highest Tribunals of Heaven, unhesitatingly traced the limits of the two main contending Powers and, harmonizing their actions, influence and rights, in a boundless conception of human progress, lifted the justice of man so high that above it there could be only the supreme justice of God.

* * * *

The aspiration of mankind, reflected in that of millions and thousands of millions of individuals through the times, has always been towards peace. Through all the wars, political struggles and civil strifes which for centuries and centuries have descended upon them as a scourge of heaven, men have always hoped and prayed and even fought, as we are now fighting, for peace. Yet, still in the times in which we live there are nations that fail to realize that peace is unattainable unless through justice to all nations. Thus again, Dante, whose mighty conception, expressed through his Divine Poem, was one of peace and justice and whose exhortations to men to desist from violence were entwined with the punishment of evil-doers, Dante is nearer to us than he was to the people of his own time and of his own country. Dante goes beyond the Middle Ages, and more decidedly beyond the coarse phase of the Middle Ages, its barbarous handling of political problems, the bloody struggles extending all over that period. He reaches our epoch, because he possessed the indomitable faith and the civil ardor which we endeavor to attain in our times. He con-

* * * *

ceived humanity through the centuries and built his conception upon permanent philosophical ideas, unchanging and unchangeable. Hence, in that one of his minor works which is nearly exclusively of political character, "De Monarchia", we find, no longer in a poetic form and with symbolical representations like in the "Divine Comedy", no longer with abstract argumentations and religious or philosophical doctrinism like in the "Convivio", but with a precise, applied reasoning, some of those same principles which today more than at any time in the past - taking in consideration the difference of conditions - mankind is still striving to adopt in order to establish the rule of the people and to prevent, or at least minimize, if not to end, war. Of course, we should not delude ourselves into believing that Dante's idea of governmental policies were entirely akin to those which prevail in democratic countries of our epoch. He was a man of politics himself, therefore, subject to the influences of political character or at least to those of the system then existing in the shadow of the Holy Roman Empire and reflecting the grandeur that was Rome. However, while he is for a Monarch as a ruler, yet, it is surprising to find how far detached he was from his times and how near he comes to us in the general conception of popular government. I shall quote only a few instances.

In a time when many fundamental rights of the cities existed by the pleasure of the Holy Roman Emperor whose supremacy, at least titularly, could not be disputed, and potentates ruled the people under absolute despotism, but in their turn owing allegiance to that Emperor; when even the English liberties contained in the Magna Charta were a grant of the King, Dante, instead conceived the right of the people to [illegible]

naturally inherent in the people, with the Monarch's power itself subject to the people's will. In fact, having in mind the framework of the republics of ancient Greece as expounded by Aristotle, he says: "Neither the citizens exist for the officials of the government, nor the people for the king; but, on the contrary, the officials exist for the citizens and the king for the people. And as polity is not subordinated to the laws, but the laws are subordinated to polity, thus those who live in conformity with the laws are not at the command of the legislator, but the legislator is at their command. From this it is evident that although government officials and the king in respect to their positions are rulers of the people, yet, in respect to their authority they are the servants of the people, and above all so is the Monarch who undoubtedly is the servant of all." Does it not sound like an excerpt from a modern popular treatise on constitutional government? (De Monarchia I, p. 14)

Two other of Dante's principles, dealing as they are with the settlement of controversies between states, seem to have been written by some modern essayists; to wit: "Wherever there may be a cause of conflict, there should be agreement reached by deliberation after consideration." (De Monarchia, I, p. 12) And: "Every controversy should be settled by deliberation and only when every effort fails in this direction (understood, to insure justice) - we should have recourse to arms." (De Monarchia, II, p. 10) This is what was to be the aim of the defunct League of Nations, and that which will be the task of any future agency now contemplated for the settlement of international disputes. Excepting possibly Aristotle, no other philosopher or poet, not even Alberico Gentili, or Hugo Grotius who lived three centuri

Dante, are nearer to us than Dante is in that respect.

Dante, the man who, banished from his birthplace, knocked at the gate of a monastery seeking peace, Dante stood for peace. Peace not as an end to itself, but as the foundation of human progress; not as the result of a compromise between contenders, but as the corollary of justice; not to let mankind acquiesce in what it has gained, but as a means to reach its goal, perfection. In times of bloodshed and destruction - in a world from which, as Schopenhauer says, Dante took the materials of his Hell and made a very proper hell out of it - (The World as Will and as Idea, IV, 59) - Dante wrote these words which should be imprinted in letters of gold in every legislative hall of the world, in every place where the representatives of all the governments of the earth will meet, when this war will be ended, to decide upon the destinies of all the nations of the world:

"It is manifest that in calmness, that is, in the tranquillity of peace, mankind will freely and easily reach its perfection which is nearly divine. By which it is also manifest that of all things that are ordered to enable us to attain a condition of blessedness, universal peace is the best." (De Monarchia, I, p. 5) And further: "Peace will be effective mostly and above all through justice." (De Monarchia, I, p. 13)

Thus spoke Dante more than six hundred years ago. And on this ground the great exile could today be nowhere more at home than in America.

* * * *

* * *

[illegible] MONSTROS"

[illegible] Eschwege die Arbeit erfolgreich [illegible] zu [illegible]

[illegible] Lente abopka tempa [illegible] kiz umrzyty Janka Orło". Nie

[illegible] wydała [illegible] "Jestem [illegible] Jestem [illegible] [illegible]

[illegible] "Jestem [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

[illegible] [illegible]

In America the cult of Dante spread rapidly after the country came into a free national life. During the first years of the 19th century an Italian writer, Lorenzo da Ponte - the author of three of the most delightful librettos put to music by Mozart - came to New York and began to lecture on Dante at the Columbia College (before then, King's College) and now Columbia University. From that humble and, for many years, solitary effort there evolved a veritable galaxy of literary stars, whose studies were principally devoted to the interpretation, the teaching and the translation of Dante's works. Already between 1835 and 1843, American pioneers in Dante's scholarship had appeared both in the North and in the South; and of them I shall confine myself to mention only two names for the sake of record: Thomas William Parsons, of Boston, and Richard Henry Wilde, of Georgia. But the most eminent students in the next half century have been three whose names are connected with Harvard University and are stars of the first magnitude in the firmament of American literature: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell and Charles Eliot Norton; a trio of such intellectual height and harmony of purpose that it would be very difficult to find another group equal to it, in that respect, in the history of any literary production and criticism.

Longfellow, who was professor of belles-lettres at Harvard from 1834 to 1854, started his English translation of the "Divine Comedy" in 1843, but so meticulous was he in his work that he did not complete it until more than twenty years later, when it was published in three volumes between 1867 and 1870. He brought into this work not only all his mastery of the

language, but also that essence of poetry for which he became famous with his own poems, while faithful to the text and preserving the spirit of the original, so that his translation of Dante's main work is generally considered the best in the English language.

Lowell, poet, essayist, diplomatist, editor of the "Atlantic Monthly" from 1857 to 1862 and of the "North American Review" from 1863 to 1872, succeeded to Longfellow in the chair of belles-lettres at Harvard and began teaching on Dante in 1856. He was the most active of the trio and his lectures and essays on Dante are still considered among the best of the kind.

Norton, the youngest of the three, professor of history of art at Harvard, co-editor with Lowell of the "North American Review", soon distinguished himself as an authority on Dante. In 1859 he published an English translation of the "New Life". Later on an English version in prose of the "Divine Comedy". In his teaching he was a master of critical exposition from every angle.

These three unique friends formed the Dante Club, whose sessions were held weekly at Longfellow's home, for the study and discussion of every phase of Dante's works and Dantist literature. In 1880, particularly through the initiative of Norton, they enlarged that Club into the "Dante Society of Harvard", now one of the most prominent of the kind in the world, and Longfellow was its first president. One of the magnificent results of this activity was the presentation to Harvard of a collection of works on Dante which has now become one of the two finest of the sort in America. Its rival is only the Willard Fiske collection at Cornell University.

"Ich bin der Meinung, daß eine Bewertung dieses Stückes nur
in Verbindung mit einer Inszenierung erfolgen kann, die
dieses Stück zu beweisen versucht, daß es nicht nur
"Theater" ist, sondern daß es Theater ist, das
Gesellschaftskritik und Gesellschaftsveränderung
"Theater" bedeutet. Es ist ein Theater

Splendid collections of Dante's literature can also be found at the Universities of Yale and Columbia. Several thousand books and pamphlets of Dante have been written by Americans.

Long would be the list of those who have spread Dante's cult in this country in the steps of the trio Longfellow-Lowell-Norton down to recent years; and long also the list of writers, teachers, translators who are today maintaining the splendid tradition of Dantist scholarship. Even as recently as 1920, a new English translation in "terza rima" of the "Inferno" was published in Boston, a remarkable work of interpretation by Eleanor Winston Murray. More recently, in 1932, appeared a splendid de-luxe edition of the translation, also in terza rima, of the whole "Divina Commedia", by Professor Melville Best Anderson, which for poetic beauty, close fidelity and scholarly notes and elucidations, has deservedly been adjudged worthy of the original. It is also an in-quarto marvel of graphic composition, designed by Hans Mardersteig and printed under his direction - note - at the Officina Bodoni of Verona, Italy, the World Book Company of Yonkers, New York, holding the copyright. And it carries an erudite introduction by Arthur Livingston, of Columbia University, who immaturely died in November 1943.

With such a radiant array of poets, scholars, teachers and translators continuing down to these very times, is it to wonder that the devotion of Dante is so deep and extensive in America? We had a marvelous proof of its depth and extent in 1921, on the occasion of the sixth centenary of Dante's death. During that year, in every corner of the world where there live men with faith in the power of intellect and who judge the giants of thought and action not by the glamour with which the contemporaries had

surrounded their names, but by the influence which they have exerted through the course of centuries upon the destinies of mankind, Dante received the greatest demonstration of honor ever tributed to any genius. And this happened not only because of Dante's being the greatest genius of his age and his country, the most inspired Poet of his nation, the loftiest inspirator of the life of his times, the first to conceive national unity and freedom for his country; but also and principally because Dante is one of the greatest geniuses of all ages and all countries, the most inspired poet of all literatures and, above all, because he was a man whose inspiration has so defied time and space that we feel it in our soul now as it was felt in Dante's himself when he conceived and wrote:

".....the Sacred Poem
To which Heaven and Earth have set their hands."

But, while the sixth centenary of the death of Dante was commemorated all over the world, nowhere, excepting Italy, did the figure of the great poet receive so full and enthusiastic tribute of reverence as in the United States. There are chairs of Dante's literature in every country of the Old World as there are in the New one; a large number of scholars in Europe as in America have devoted all their lives to the interpretation of the works of Dante; literary clubs have been founded on the other side of the Atlantic as on this side for the purpose of collecting materials, holding discussions, delivering lectures and editing or publishing periodicals and books bearing upon the Divine Comedy and the minor works of Dante. Yet, the noblest laurels from a foreign nation to Dante's glory were in that year, 1921, contributed by the United States. To begin with, Prof. Gra[illegible] Harvard Uni[illegible]

one of the best illustrators of Dante in this country, delivered a most impressive lecture at the Dante Celebration held in Washington under the auspices of the President of the United States, a ceremony that was presided over by Charles Evans Hughes, then Secretary of State. Many Institutions of Higher Learning, from New England to Texas, held special courses and public meetings with lectures on Dante, and published several articles, essays and even books on Dante. A large number of students of literature, from the most erudite scholars to the simple lovers of good reading; millions and millions of citizens, individually or in groups, participated in a form or another in the tributes of honor to Dante. A survey of all these manifestations would fill a fair sized volume. A monument to Dante was inaugurated in Washington and another in New York; and a square in the greatest metropolis of the Western Hemisphere was named after him.

The reason for this intellectual demonstration is not difficult to understand. While Italy is still to be considered the best and perhaps the only true interpreter of Dante as a poet, the father of her tongue, the first exponent of her national freedom and unity, still, his conception of universal peace nowhere, outside of Italy, has found a like inspiration as in America. As Dante was the only man of the Middle Ages whose thought soared above the strifes of his times and who, embracing in a spiritual vision a new epoch, exhorted all the world to banish hatred and lust of conquest, so that harmony of political powers should bring peace, love and justice to mankind, thus America alone among all nations of the world stands openly today at the threshold of a new era with a righteous and sincere desire of universal peace; peace not because of fear, but because of the horrors of war

the permanence of which other nations, less fortunate although no less deserving, will be freely allowed and helped to build for themselves that future to which they are entitled in a civilized world; in other words, peace to foster the establishment of the rules of reason, justice, progress, humanity.

It is, therefore, as though American scholars and statesmen, moulders of public opinion and even plain citizens who have the cult of Dante at heart, feel that Dante is the forerunner and the symbol of America's conception of peace, the light which will guide them, through the insidious reefs of the political and economic ocean, to a rational, human and stable readjustment of the conditions of the world in perfect harmony with the aims of civilization; a hortative warning and a most noble example to mankind.

In this sense, above any other, may America claim that Dante is her own as well as Italy's. Thus tonight not only we pay honor to one of the greatest geniuses of all ages, but reaffirm our unshakable faith in the principles for which Dante stood in his city and in exile, those same principles which today more than at any other time inspire the life of this Nation.

That peace is the foundation of progress; justice the only means to insure peace; and that peace will be maintained only through such conception of justice as comes nearest to that sentiment of brotherly love which should embrace all people of good will on earth.

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